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Theatraverse : Website

1 http://www.theatraverse.com/index.php?lang=en

[Figure 1]

Caption: Joanne Allan (right) with the cast of Monsieur Somebody
Credits: Photograph by Farid Cherqaoui

The Interview

2 Joanne Allan, the artistic director of Theatraverse, was born in Aberdeenshire in Scotland where she cultivated her interest in theatre from a young age. Primary school drama was followed by youth theatre in Aberdeen, national youth theatre summer festivals, and eventually performing with Scottish Youth Theatre. Acting, however, was not the only thing that interested her. The main attraction was the environment of the theatre and the rehearsal room. She was "fascinated by the energy that the directors oozed and thought, 'that's what I want to do, make people feel the way that person is making me feel.'"

3 Allan went on to study French and Drama at Queen's University, Belfast. A particular influence was Rachel O'Riordan, now artistic director at the Sherman Theatre in Cardiff, who not only taught Allan but also directed her in several productions, all "wonderful and challenging experiences". O'Riordan suggested postgraduate study at École Jacques Lecoq, where actor training asserts the primacy of communication through movement and gesture, rather than speech[1]. Although aiming to become a director eventually, Allan felt that she first needed to "understand what she would be asking of her acting colleagues", so went to Paris to complete her acting training. She found the school a difficult environment, "quite intense physically and emotionally", but now recognises that it gave her the space "to work out what my body could (and couldn't) do." This physical awareness has become "the most important tool" in her current theatre practice.

4 On completion of her studies Allan stayed in Paris and became a trainee at Théâtre du Voyageur. The artistic director here was Chantal Melior, herself inspired by Ariane Mnouchkine at Théâtre du Soleil. Melior led daily classes that built on the physical work undertaken at École Jacques Lecoq, and also encouraged her actors to develop their textual and vocal skills. The latter was supplemented by working with Carol Lipkind, who taught Allan to sing and with whom she worked on several shows. Through this process Allan began to discover her own voice. She felt "many more opportunities were open to me and I also felt freer to create my own work – my physical voice was linked to my expressive voice."

5 Now Allan is above all a theatre director. But her earlier experiences in youth theatre, as a student and as an acting trainee continue to inform her work. "I was mostly pleased with the feeling that the theatre is a place where I can be somewhere else, take people somewhere else, and have the opportunity to leave a room different from how I or they entered it. I still remember some scenes from plays I saw during these early formative years and now one of my ambitions with my work is that people will remember it (for better or worse) and feel a little differently from how they felt before."

Theatraverse

6 Allan's own company, based in Paris, is Theatraverse. Founded in 2008, the company was created "to develop inter-European relations through the use of linguistic communication both on stage and in bilingual theatre workshops". The company predominantly produces "bilingual theatre for Francophone and Anglophone audiences

alike, whether they are bilingual or not", and all productions tour, in the same version, in France and the UK. Workshops are supplementary to the core activity of making theatre, and even here may lead to performances, using different practices and techniques, depending on the competences and contributions of the participants. Allan is clear, however, that the company's focus is always artistic ; pedagogical outcomes are fortuitous by-products rather than primary objectives.

7 The intention was originally to create a fluid collaborative ensemble. Ten years later, however, the company has two regular acting members (Siva Nagapattinam and Guillaume Paulette) and one regular workshop leader (Fiamma Bennett). Although based in Paris, these artists create a company that is both international and multilingual. Everybody is fluent in English and French : Bennett also speaks Italian ; Nagapattinam has Dutch and Tamil. Each actor is thus often performing in a second language (L2). For Allan this confers a distinct advantage. "L2 provides a kind of linguistic mask that gives the actor a distance from the words – it's not 'you' any more, even the acting process is playing a part." Some argue that it is impossible "to play 'juste'[2] in L2 because you don't have the nuance and the cultural baggage." But for Allan "you don't become a character, an actor only *plays* a character – so the actor is as 'juste' as possible but there can never be a total transformation." It works because "acting in L2 makes you work harder to understand the text. Not everybody does this in their first language. It's easy to let some words go because that is what happens in real life."

8 What unites the international ensemble is former study at École Jacques Lecoq, and the training they received very much informs the aesthetic of Theatraverse : "the physical and visual nature of our performances". They do, however, also respond to inspiration from several different practitioners. Allan herself brings influences from Ariane Mnouchkine, Peter Brook and, to a certain extent, Robert Wilson, although "I would never pretend to have a common aesthetic to these great practitioners !" Recently they have also been experimenting with Forum Theatre techniques in their workshops. Predominantly however, their work "is about verbal and non-verbal communication that we explore using, rather obviously, text and physicality."

9 To date, Theatraverse has created three pieces of work, with one more in development. The first, produced in 2010, was *Lost in Scotland*, a bilingual and bicultural[3] exploration of stereotypical views of Scotland held by French people, adapted from a book by Isabelle Gilbert. This was followed by the bilingual adaptation of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*. Here Allan worked on the adaptation alone before bringing it to the rehearsal room, where the additional input from the actors led to a process of collaborative translation. Most recently has been a bilingual play, *Great Artists Steal*, commissioned from Seamus Collins, until recently part of the New Playwrights programme at the Lyric Theatre in Belfast. The show was performed at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2014 after being rehearsed at the JOLT Festival in Gloucester.

Bilingual Theatre

10 As an aesthetic in its own right, bilingualism in theatre has been little studied. This is surprising, as examples of what Carlson (2009)[4] calls heteroglossia go back throughout theatre history. Audiences have always been aware of other cultures, and foreign languages have been used to mark certain characters as 'other', usually in the pursuit of verisimilitude, often for comic effect. Furthermore, much European Medieval theatre

mixes Latin and the vernacular, the former being used as an indicator of power or education. Elizabethan dramatists were also comfortable with heteroglossia : Shakespeare's *Henry V* for example uses Welsh, Scottish and Irish dialects of English in one scene, and French in others.

11 More recently bilingualism has been a feature of post-colonial theatre, for example the work of Tara Arts in the UK (Marinetti, 2013)[5], where South Asian immigrants produce work using multiple languages as resistance against the cultural hegemony of spoken English. Theatrical heteroglossia in celebration of minority cultures is also reported in Australia, where Doppio Teatro used a mix of English, Italian dialects and Emigrante, an Italian-English pidgin, to reflect the experience of Italian migrants (Crea, 1992)[6]. Similar examples are reported in Texas, working with Mexican Americans living in a state dominated by English speakers (Rosenberg, 1978)[7] ; and Western Canada, promoting the culture of the minority bilingual French-English community there (Ladouceur and Nolette, 2011)[8].

12 Allan's own interest in bilingual theatre, however, is driven neither by the need for verisimilitude, nor by post-colonial concerns, nor by a desire to create intercultural theatre (the influences of Mnouchkine, Brook and Wilson notwithstanding). Rather she takes a post-modern approach in which the use of language is itself one of the formal elements of a production's semiotic code, adding meaning additional to that carried by the words. Her experiments in bilingual post-modernism began as an undergraduate, when she directed a bilingual adaptation of *La Leçon (The Lesson)* by Eugène Ionesco. Later, at École Jacques Lecoq she began to understand "that language, comprehension and communication are fundamental elements of stage craft, but that often words in one language or another weren't the most important." Theatraverse was established to explore this further, at a time when in Paris there were no other bilingual theatre companies : "we were all alone. In a way this made life much harder... However, it also allowed us a freedom to find our own style and our own approach that we can now share with other practitioners and workshop participants."

13 Given the relative lack of literature on an aesthetics of bilingual theatre practice (the articles and chapters cited here are more descriptive than generally theoretical), it is unsurprising that the development of Allan's approach has been heuristic rather than building on the work of others. In the case of bilingual adaptations, the rule of thumb has been to choose originals that not only lend themselves to adaptation, but rather call for it. "Ionesco's absurd works are perfect material as the question of communication is so pivotal to every text." The bilingual adaptation thus allows the development of some of the key themes in the original, language choices being made in such a way that they draw out those themes. Similarly in commissioned work, bilingualism is an integral part of the plot, adding depth to the story and a richness to the exploration of themes of communication that would not be possible in a monolingual play.

14 In the case of *Rhinoceros*, work developed from studying both the original text and an English translation. It was important that the two were well-matched. "I try to choose the one that is closest to the original in terms of style. For example, with *Rhinoceros*, I was interested in Martin Crimp's translation, but it was slightly modernised, and in the end we used Derek Prouse's translation, which felt closer to the original despite being a little dated. This is a choice that allows a unity of style despite the two languages."

15 In all Theatraverse's work, the fundamental choices to be made are about which characters speak which languages, at which moments, and why. "None of the linguistic choices are random, we have many guidelines that we use in rehearsal, that the actors learn to perfect and then forget in order to avoid them getting in the way of the other themes that we are presenting to audiences. Sometimes audience members will reflect on the linguistic choices and play at 'finding the rules', sometimes they question our choices, sometimes they accept that this is simply the way the play has been written and don't worry about it, but certainly it makes for interesting post-show debate."

16 To give an example, in *Rhinoceros*, "the characters spoke French until they became potentially susceptible to transformation. At this point they started mixing French and English, and then spoke only English. Some characters, who were always susceptible (Jean for example) spoke only in English. Berenger only spoke French. This was not a rule that we necessarily wanted the audience to 'get', although sometimes they did and that was very interesting too. We have our own rules that we use for working, but we don't try to spell them out to the audience or make the plays only about those rules. The bilingual approach is there to enhance themes and investigate them in different ways, rather than being the central focus of the performance."

17 In *Great Artists Steal*, the company's first commissioned work, language itself was a theme of the play, having been invented by the character known as 'The Man'. "He wasn't very good at it, however, and spoke without conjugation or flair. However, The Younger Man, who was far more advanced on many levels, spoke so well that he had evolved as far as being able to use a second language: French. The Man's wife (The Woman) was secretly also able to speak French, although she never told her husband. It was a way that she communicated with other characters behind The Man's back." As with *Rhinoceros*, the actors were cognisant of this approach, but it was not explicitly communicated to the audience.

18 For Allan, one of the exciting things about Theatraverse's bilingual theatre is that "everyone will see a different show, depending on their understanding of each language." This can make it difficult for the actors : "The sensitivity required to perform in a bilingual play is high. The actors can sometimes feel great moments of loneliness onstage if the audience miss a joke or don't understand an emotional passage." It is not always positive for the audience either, which can sometimes feel frustration. But "I am yet to talk to someone after one of our shows who feels indifferent. This to me is very important indeed."

Communication through physical and spoken language

19 Clearly, the central preoccupation of Theatraverse is communication, "the struggles and facilities we have in communicating with one another, thanks to, because of, or in spite of speaking the same or a different language. The way we communicate depending on our relationships is fascinating and really does find a way of being a main theme of a lot of our work, whether intentionally or not." *Lost in Scotland* uses language and communication to explore intercultural differences between Scotland and France. *Rhinoceros* explores the link between language and power, and by creating a bilingual adaptation, Theatraverse used the play to question the dominance of the English language in Europe. *Great Artists Steal* uses language as both the medium and the subject matter through which to explore the creativity of humanity. Theatraverse links these

repertoire choices to the company philosophy that "pays particular attention to words, to their role in communication both on and off stage."

20 Despite this claim, however, a focus on the written and spoken text is never the starting point for the work of Theatraverse. "We engage our bodies fully and often work a great deal without any text at all in the early stages of rehearsals," because "our bodies are our main tool in communicating, without our bodies we would have no voice at all." Given their training this is unsurprising, and rehearsals mirror the techniques experienced by the company in workshops and lessons at École Jacques Lecoq. "We are constantly up and down during sessions, all of us, using our bodies to explain what we really mean. We also aim to closely observe and listen to what our colleagues are telling us by watching their bodies. I try to apply this in 'real life' too, which makes for some very interesting Metro journeys."

21 The return to the written text comes only later. At first, the actors work "with text in hand so as not to falsely learn lines, but rather learn them alongside the physicality of the character in the moment." During this phase "our bodies are in practice daily, exploring character, relationships, 'etats d'ame', an awareness of the entire body is something that we aim to achieve throughout the process in order to reach precision. Once we are precise, we can relax and allow the body to do the rest of the work – the body remembers." Only now do the actors consider saying the text without holding the script. "This is useful in finding the 'juste' way of portraying the text, as well as making life infinitely easier for the actor."

22 For Allan this physicality is common sense. If you understand the context then you understand more from the body language than other aspects of communication. Even the intonation is more meaningful. "The words aren't so relevant." This is not, however, merely theatrical ideology. Neuroscientists have recently discovered the Mirror Neuron System (MNS), a part of the brain activated in response to seeing actions performed by others. The MNS seems to be connected to language development and, of greater relevance here, to our instinctive understanding of others, or empathy. The response of the MNS occurs without, and therefore faster than cognition, and without conceptual reasoning. Theatre theoretician Bruce McConachie applies these theories from Cognitive Studies to theatre audiences[9], suggesting that an interactive relationship between actor and spectator is established before any cognitive processes occur : empathy and an instinctive understanding of body language take place faster, through the MNS, than the cognitive interpreting of spoken language. It is predominantly through their body language, then, that actors create a strong interaction with their spectators.

23 Although he was working before these advances in neuroscience, this is the approach of Lecoq, who "uses only 'le mot juste' to establish context" and then relies on physicality to tell the story. Extending this principle leads to the effectiveness of Theatraverse's bilingual aesthetic. "We have two audiences who are mostly monolingual, but they understand everything because of the support from the physicality." If the individual spectator can establish context from 'le mot juste' in their own language, then the physicality means that an additional language can be added without compromising any understanding. Indeed, the physicality of the performance gives spectators the tools to decode the meaning created not only within the language, but also by the choice of language being spoken. For Allan, "some will have a greater insight into the themes if they speak neither language, as they will focus on intonation,

body language, gestures, facial expressions and so on." This intentional parity of body and spoken languages suggests we might more accurately describe the approach of Theatraverse as a *trilingual* theatre aesthetic.

Monsieur Somebody

24 Theatraverse's current work, a second commission from Collins entitled *Monsieur Somebody*, demonstrates the defining importance of body language to this aesthetic. Indeed, in this case the company's first step was to undertake an intensive week-long research period to explore the physicality of their chosen theme even before the text was written. Collins was in attendance, but the exploration of body language before spoken word was central to the creative process.

25 The framework for the research week came from studying the work of Manu Bragança on the cultural legacy of war,[10] and the idea of the representation of the hero and anti-hero in post-war literature. Various texts about survivors and victims of tragedy were used as source material, including two films : *Release*, set in Belfast during 'The Troubles' ; and Claude Lanzmann's documentary film *Le Doyen des Juifs*, which portrays the ambivalent roles of the rabbi Benjamin Murmelstein, who during World War Two was a senior official of the Jewish community in Vienna, and later the 'Jewish dean' in the Terezin concentration camp. Murmelstein, in his interviews, is "direct, cold and distanced about what he did, or what he was made to do. He never breaks down, he never shows any emotion, and just says that you do what you have to do". Primo Levi texts were also influential. "It's eloquent, beautiful, wonderful writing, but it recounts terrible things, all the time refraining from giving an opinion. He describes emotion but it is not subjective – it's a very scientific way of presenting things."

26 Also significant was Edgar Hilsenrath's *The Nazi and the Barber*. The book describes a Nazi whose actions during the war are inexcusable, but "the worst things happen post-holocaust". The Nazi's best friend had been a Jewish barber, and after the war the Nazi avoids prosecution by adopting the barber's identity : they had spent so much time together as children and young adults that the Nazi knew how to behave both as a barber and as a Jew. "The whole story is dark, grimy, horrible. Reading it made me feel shocked and appalled, but you get used to it as you read it, because you become numb to it. I developed a cold distance to all the actions because the character has a cold distance. He treats sex the same way : it's dirty, but treated as banal."

27 Allan's own reactions to these sources were reflected in the improvisations of the actors during the research week. Their aim was to get beyond a simple recitation of the texts : this was "insufficient to get the message across", especially when the subject matter is so evocative. Drawing on their Lecoq training, the actors tried to find accurate embodied re-presentation of the texts, first experimenting with music and movement to try to portray emotions that the words couldn't express. They found, however, that unlike their earlier work, here their own experiences were insufficient from which to build physical portrayals that weren't emotionally distanced from the original. Later they took the music away, working on Holocaust-related themes in respectful silence, but the resulting improvisations were even more bleak. Furthermore, the imposed auditory restrictions proved inhibiting for the actors. So they added sounds or gibberish words "to try to express bigger emotions, but they

couldn't do it. The sounds didn't feel right – we just can't imagine those horrors and so we can't find a way to express them."

28 Finally, they agreed that the source texts they had chosen were themselves too bleak to be performable, and they turned instead to verbatim texts of Holocaust survivors or those living in Belfast. The results were better. "But the company still felt that there was a problem." The process of "digging deep and sharing 'etats d'ame' that came purely from the inside" wasn't possible. "They hadn't been there, so they couldn't know enough about the environment." Somehow "this is allowed with Macbeth, but for us, with this material, it is not okay". The only exception was Collins. Having spent his formative years in Northern Ireland he had the legitimacy to speak about that subject.

29 The inability during the research to find appropriate physical re-presentations of the source texts led Allan to the conclusion that a true-to-life Holocaust story would not be appropriate for the trilingual aesthetic developed by Theatraverse. Instead, Collins turned to Hilsenrath's theme of "pretending to be somebody you are not and getting away with it", but in the context of a terrible historical event that is fictional. The central character of *Monsieur Somebody*, Claude, becomes a case-study in research about such an event, after claiming to be a survivor. This, however, is a lie, a pretext for the manipulation of the researcher and her husband.

30 Taking from the research week ideas that reflect its process as much as its triggers, Collins makes credibility the central theme of *Monsieur Somebody*. The lack of credibility in trying to portray the Holocaust, whether verbally or physically, shifted his focus on to the human condition, something that every member of the company has the resources to work with. Locating the play in a specific historical setting became less important than the behaviour of the people caught up in those events, and the moral battles that humans have to fight. Instead of trying credibly to present the horrors of war, the play frames credibility as the conflicting pressures of what is and what is not allowed in terms of an individual's moral limits. The idea of the anti-hero that triggered the development phase is replaced by a would-be anti-hero who was not even there ; "a character who doesn't suffer from the same complexes as us, someone who lies, deceives and astounds us with his 'unacceptable' behaviour." This is a theatre of pretence, not only in the sense of actors pretending to be real people ; here actors are pretending to be people who are pushing the limits of their credibility while pretending to be something they are not.

31 Throughout *Monsieur Somebody*, Collins plays with bilingualism as a means of marking different characters' credibility. Throughout, the factory owner speaks only English. The two other characters use both French and English, although in Claude's case his English is not of a high standard, perhaps reflecting his lack of credibility. Any attempt to explain the intention, however, is premature. Collins doesn't share his rules, and as with Theatraverse's other work, collaborative translation in the rehearsal room may shift the manner in which the bilingualism informs and reinforces the themes of the piece. Rehearsal will also add the actors' physical re-presentation of the words, giving individual spectators a multi-layered text, a post-modern trilingual aesthetic, from which to construct meaning according to their own experiences and linguistic competences. The result seems likely to provoke the "interesting post-show debate" that Allan is looking for.

NOTES

1. Lecoq's approach is documented in his writing, for example Lecoq, J. (2006) Theatre of Movement and Gesture. Abingdon: Routledge.
2. 'Truthful' or 'honest'
3. Bicultural theatre is a particular form of theatre that aims not only to use two languages but also to represent two different cultures in performance. It is best known from work in Australia and New Zealand. See for example Greenwood, J. (2005) 'Journeying into the third space: A study of how theatre can be used to interpret the emergent space between cultures', *Youth Theatre Journal*, 19(1), pp. 1-16.
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5. Marinetti, C. (2013) 'Transnational, Multilingual and Post-dramatic: Rethinking the Location of Translation in Contemporary Theatre', in Bigliazzi, S., Kofler, P. and Ambrosi, P. (eds.) *Theatre Translation in Performance*. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 27-37.
6. Crea, T. (1992) 'New Forms, New Relationships', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 8(29), pp. 75-80.
7. Rosenberg, J. (1978a) 'La Compania de Teatro Bilingue', *Educational Theatre Journal*, 30(2), pp. 240-252.
8. Ladouceur, L. and Nolette, N. (2011) 'Cow-boy poetre: a Bilingual Performance for a Unilingual Audience', in Baines, R., Marinetti, C. and Perteghella, M. (eds.) *Staging and Performing Translation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 155-169.
9. McConachie, B. (2007) 'Falsifiable Theories for Theatre and Performance Studies', *Theatre Journal*, 59(4), pp. 553-577.
10. Bragança, M. and Tame, P. (2015) *The Long Aftermath: Cultural Legacies of Europe at War, 1936-2016*. New York: Berghahn Books.

ABSTRACTS

Interview with Joanne Allan, artistic director of Theatraverse, a bilingual French/English company based in Paris. The interview was conducted by emails and one face to face meeting in September and October 2017. In exploring the repertoire tackled by the company in the last decade, this essay reveals the company's grounding in the techniques of Jacques Lecoq, the development of a post-modern bilingual theatre aesthetic through working with writer Seamus Collins, and the importance of physicality in presenting a bilingual play to monolingual audiences. It concludes with a description of how the company's aesthetic has been applied in the development of Collins' latest play for Theatraverse: *Monsieur Somebody*.

Entretien avec Joanne Allan, directrice artistique du Theatraverse, compagnie bilingue de la région parisienne. L'entretien consista en une série d'échanges électroniques et d'entrevues de Septembre à Octobre 2017. Etude du répertoire de la compagnie de la dernière décennie, cet essai met à jour les techniques de Jacques Lecoq employées par Theatraverse, l'élaboration d'une esthétique théâtrale post-moderne bilingue lors de la collaboration avec l'auteur Seamus Collins, et l'importance de la corporalité dans les mises en scènes bilingues à destination d'un public non-

bilingue. La contribution évoque enfin l'approche de la compagnie pour la mise en scène de *Monsieur Somebody* de Collins.

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AUTHOR

MICHAEL RICHARDSON

School of Social Sciences, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh
PhD Candidate
mr38@hw.ac.uk